What exactly is resilience and how can it be enhanced? Farming systems in Europe are rapidly evolving while at the same time being under threat, as seen by the disappearance of dozens of farms every day. Farming systems must become more resilient in response to growing economic, environmental, institutional, and social challenges facing Europe’s agriculture. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for enhanced resilience has become even more apparent and continues to be an overarching guiding principle of EU policy-making. Resilience challenges and strategies are framed within four main processes affecting decision-making in agriculture: risk management, farm demographics, governance and agricultural practices. This empirical focus looks at very diverse contexts, with eleven case studies from Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain and Sweden. This study will help determine the future and sustainability of European farming systems. This title is available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

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Resilient and Sustainable Farming Systems in Europe
Exploring Diversity and Pathways
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Preface

This book showcases findings from the SURE-Farm research project which aimed to assess the resilience and sustainability of farming systems in Europe. The call for greater resilience responds to the accumulating economic, environmental, institutional, and social challenges facing Europe’s agriculture. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for enhanced resilience has become an overarching guiding principle of EU policymaking. But what exactly is resilience and how can it be enhanced? How can farming systems prepare for different and often simultaneous types of shocks and stresses, for unexpected and even unknown events?

The chapters in this book distinguish three resilience capacities: for some shocks and stresses robustness (‘bouncing back’) is adequate, but other circumstances require adaptability and transformability (deep learning and change). Putting these capacities at the centre, each chapter addresses key questions such as which characteristics of a system can enhance resilience, whether current governance systems enhance or constrain resilience, and which actors can actually influence and build resilience capacities.

The book is organised in three parts. The first part addresses resilience challenges and strategies for four main processes affecting decision-making in agriculture: risk management, farm demographics including the availability of labour, governance with a focus on EU and local policies, and agricultural practices. The second part portrays the empirical heart of the SURE-Farm project and presents eleven chapters referring to the eleven diverse case studies in the project. Each chapter provides a unique insight into the resilience challenges of Europe’s diverse farming systems and thought-provoking ideas to respond to these. In the third part of the book, findings are synthesised into integrated assessments across case studies, principles to enhance the resilience of farming systems, lessons learned from co-creation processes, and a reflection on the SURE-Farm approach.
Promisingly, the chapters identify various pathways to enhance resilience. However, many of the suggestions require substantial change compared to current practices and policies. For instance, current resilience strategies are often geared too much towards increasing the profitability of farming systems and tend to neglect the coupling of agricultural production with local institutions, natural resources, and a facilitating infrastructure for innovation. Also, current policies are not sufficiently balanced in their support for robustness, adaptability, and transformability of Europe’s farming systems.

Yet, there are reasons for optimism. First, the chapters express much spirit for change – and calls for more long-term vision and courage. Second, the systematic analysis of the multiple components contributing to resilience enables the development of a better understanding of processes of change in agri-food systems, the need to develop greater resilience in Europe’s farming systems, and the priority areas to be addressed.

We wish you an inspiring read.
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We are tremendously grateful to all members of the SURE-Farm consortium for their dedicated participation and collaboration throughout the duration of the SURE-Farm project. They conducted a broad range of research with multiple qualitative and quantitative methods in many different locations and contributed their analyses and interpretations. These diverse empirical engagements brought the SURE-Farm concept to life and enabled its further development.

We also sincerely thank the many participants in the interactive SURE-Farm methods, from the farmers and farming families to the wide set of stakeholders within and outside the farming systems. Bringing together multiple perspectives on historic trajectories and future scenarios is a necessary – and enjoyable and illuminating – part of understanding resilience.

We also express our gratitude to the scientific board of the SURE-Farm project. Their high-level reviews and constructive feedback contributed to the quality of project outcomes. Gratitude also goes to the co-creation group. Discussions through the online platform and during project meetings sharpened our thinking about practical implications.

Acknowledgements are also attributed to the external reviewers of the book outline and drafts of the chapters. Their fresh and critical look at our findings strengthened the coherence and conclusions of the chapters.

We also thank the European Commission for having financed the SURE-Farm project under the Horizon 2020 programme (grant 727520) and for the fruitful seminars and discussions on the resilience of European farming systems. We hope that these discussions will proceed and continue to inform the efforts of European policymakers to enhance the resilience of Europe’s diverse farming systems.

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